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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the media and public opinion concerning national elections is examined. Trends in public opinion and media emphasis were analyzed according to attention to political issues, ideological concepts, and party identification. A random sample of approximately 220 presidential election stories in the New York Times was taken for each of seven election years from 1952 to 1976. Data for public opinion were obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Although findings are mixed, it is evident that the media's response to the different campaigns was somewhat more volatile than the public's. There was little evidence of the ability of the media to raise the salience of policy issues in the public mind. However, in the case of ideology, parallel trends in the media and public opinion were found. Public response moved upward in response to the ideological stimulus of particular candidates. It was concluded that media coverage contributes to declining party identification. (Author/KC)

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THE IMPACT OF THE MASS MEDIA ON THE CHANGING AMERICAN VOTER

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Abstract

THE IMPACT OF THE MASS MEDIA ON THE CHANGING AMERICAN VOTER

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A considerable amount of evidence has been collected recently which indicates striking shifts in American electoral behavior. Voters are more ideological and issue-oriented, and distinctly less likely to identify with one of the major political parties. We have as yet only incomplete explanations of these trends. Some scholars have speculated that the news media may have played an important role in stimulating changing opinions and beliefs.

This paper reports the initial findings of a set of parallel time series analyses of trends in the mass media and public opinion for the period 1952 to 1976. We have relied for the most part on the ICPSR national election studies and a complementary content analysis of the relative emphasis on political parties, ideology, political issues and candidates' personal qualities in the New York Times for the nine months preceding each of the seven presidential elections during this period. It is possible that trends in the New York Times do not correspond closely to patterns in the wire services, other papers and broadcast news so these initial findings must be taken as tentative

The results we find, however, are clear and consistent. There is little evidence of parallel trends in the media and public opinion. The survey data on attentiveness to political issues and ideological concepts among mass publics seem to support the generally accepted assumptions about this period in American political history -- in contrast to the quiet Eisenhower era, Goldwater and McGovern were unusually ideological candidates who in their losing efforts nonetheless succeeded in attracting considerable attention to a number of dormant issues which distinguished them from the incumbent. The media, however, devoted the most attention to issues during the Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960 followed by a sharp decrease in ensuing elections. The McGovern election, it appears, generated less media attention to issues than in the "issueless" 1950's, and represents a low point rather than a high point in references to ideological concepts. Also, the data on the decline of prominence of political parties illustrate an inexplicable twelve-year lag between the media and the public and an unusual disjuncture in 1972.

The results, of course, do not rule out the possibility of media effects and more subtle forms of agenda setting. But the data raise serious questions about the simple parallel trends hypothesis on which survey researchers have relied heavily in trying to explain the phenomenon of the changing American voter.

Political sociologists and political scientists have documented a number of intriguing changes in the behavior of the American voter over the last two decades. Voters are less likely to identify themselves as strongly attached to the Democratic or Republican parties. Even among party-identifiers, the influence of party on the vote-decision seems to be somewhat weaker now. Voters are more likely to identify specific political issues in describing their thinking during political campaigns and these issues appear to be more tightly organized into ideological clusters. Finally, there is evidence that the relative issue positions of opposing candidates have come to play an increasingly significant role in citizens' ultimate voting decisions.[1] (Nie, et al., 1975; Nie and Andersen, 1974; Miller and Miller, 1977; Miller and Levitin, 1976; Pomper, 1972.)

Thus far, the analysis of these trends has been primarily descriptive in character. Researchers have taken great care in measuring such phenomena as levels of political conceptualization, party identification, opinion preferences and issue voting, and the graphing of trends in these variables over time. But the development and testing of theories of what might have caused some of these trends has been either neglected entirely or handled rather informally. Some scholars refer to the expansion of higher education throughout this period (Nie, et al, 1975). It is no doubt a contributing factor, although it would hardly explain sudden and dramatic shifts such as the rise of ideology and constraint in 1964. Other scholars have noted that movement away from party identification has been especially pronounced among entering cohorts of voters which suggests the importance of age and historical effects (Converse, 1976). But clearly educational trends and cohort effects represent only partial explanations.

Researchers have come to conclude that a fundamental cause of changing voting behavior is an interaction between three new elements: 1) new events and issues (especially Vietnam, social protest and the "social issue"), 2) new candidates (especially Goldwater and McGovern) and, 3) the growth of the mass media (especially television). Kevin Phillips dubbed it "Mediacracy"; others refer to the "New Politics," "Issue Politics" or because of the apparent impact on the citizenry, the "New American Voter." (Phillips, 1975; Mendelsohn and Crespi, 1970; Miller and Levitin, 1976)

This paper represents an attempt to develop a more rigorous and critical test of the New Politics/Issue Voting Hypotheses especially as they impute a causal role to the media. Several intriguing mysteries remain to be solved. Studies of media exposure and political interest throughout this period, for example, indicate that the public has not increased its consumption of newspapers or broadcast journalism and does not claim to be any more interested in election campaigns or politics in general. (Robinson, 1976, 97; Nie, et al., 1975) Can we conclude therefore that if there has been a change it would have to be found in the actual content of the mass media? Have candidates for some reason come to articulate their positions on the issues much more clearly? Are reporters increasingly emphasizing the ideological and philosophical contexts of political issues and events? Are candidates and media commentators making fewer references to political parties, party philosophies and the link between parties and candidates?

A Content Analysis

As part of a larger research project analyzing trends in American media and politics over the last three decades we have conducted a content analysis

of election coverage in the New York Times. A comparison of trends in media coverage and the archived public opinion data of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research provides an interesting test of media agenda setting in the electoral context. Of course, the Times is not necessarily characteristic of the full spectrum of newspapers, magazines and broadcast journalism available to the American citizenry. Its representativeness of the American media is an issue we will return to in a later section. But the international prestige of the paper and its long-standing tradition of detailed coverage of national politics make it an ideal resource for an initial inquiry of this sort.

We took a random sample of about 220 presidential election stories and editorials for each of seven election years from 1952 to 1976. We sampled 25 calendar days from the primaries and convention period (February to August) and 25 days covering the actual election (September, October and early November). Election coverage, of course, is heavier in the later months and as a result the 25 days from the election period generated 70% of the total sampled articles. We used the same sampled dates for each year to minimize possible distortion due to sampling fluctuations. Our procedures called for the coding of all front page stories for each sampled day (and their continuation on inner pages) all editorials and a random sample of at least two additional election stories, if available, from the inner pages. Political advertising, letters to the editor, and very short news stories (less than six column inches) were excluded.

Since our primary interest was in contrasting media coverage and public perceptions of the elections we used a modified version of the ICPSR Candidate and Party Mastercodes to maximize comparability. The Mastercodes were

designed to encompass the variety of answers solicited by the open-ended survey questions which have been used at the opening of the ICPSR election interviews since 1952. The questions ask straightforwardly what reasons the respondent might have for voting for or against either of the major political parties or presidential candidates. The number of content categories in the Mastercode has expanded somewhat over the years and now includes some 500 distinct political issues, ideological principles, events, connections with interest groups, candidate qualities, or recent trends which might be mentioned as a consideration of voters in making their decisions. We simplified and streamlined the code somewhat by grouping similar categories together for a working coding scheme of 150 categories.[2]

The actual coding of newspaper stories was conducted by six extensively trained graduate and undergraduate students in the social sciences at Yale University. Their task was to carefully read each sampled story and record the five most prominent political actors, issues, interest groups, political parties or events mentioned and how these various objects and issues were linked together. Thus for example, a story about 1) Barry Goldwater making a well-received campaign speech to 2) an American Legion group in Ohio about 3) the importance of protecting the defense component of the federal budget would be coded as 1) Republican Candidate, 2) Interest Group-Veterans, 3) Issue-Strong National Defense. A second set of up to five Linkage Codes would record that the Republican Candidate had expressed strong support of this issue position and that the audience group was characterized in the article as strongly supporting the candidate. A total of five codes and five linkages proved adequate for summarizing the thrust most articles, in fact many articles required fewer. The coding, of course, was not designed to capture each of the subtleties in the journalists' choice of words or

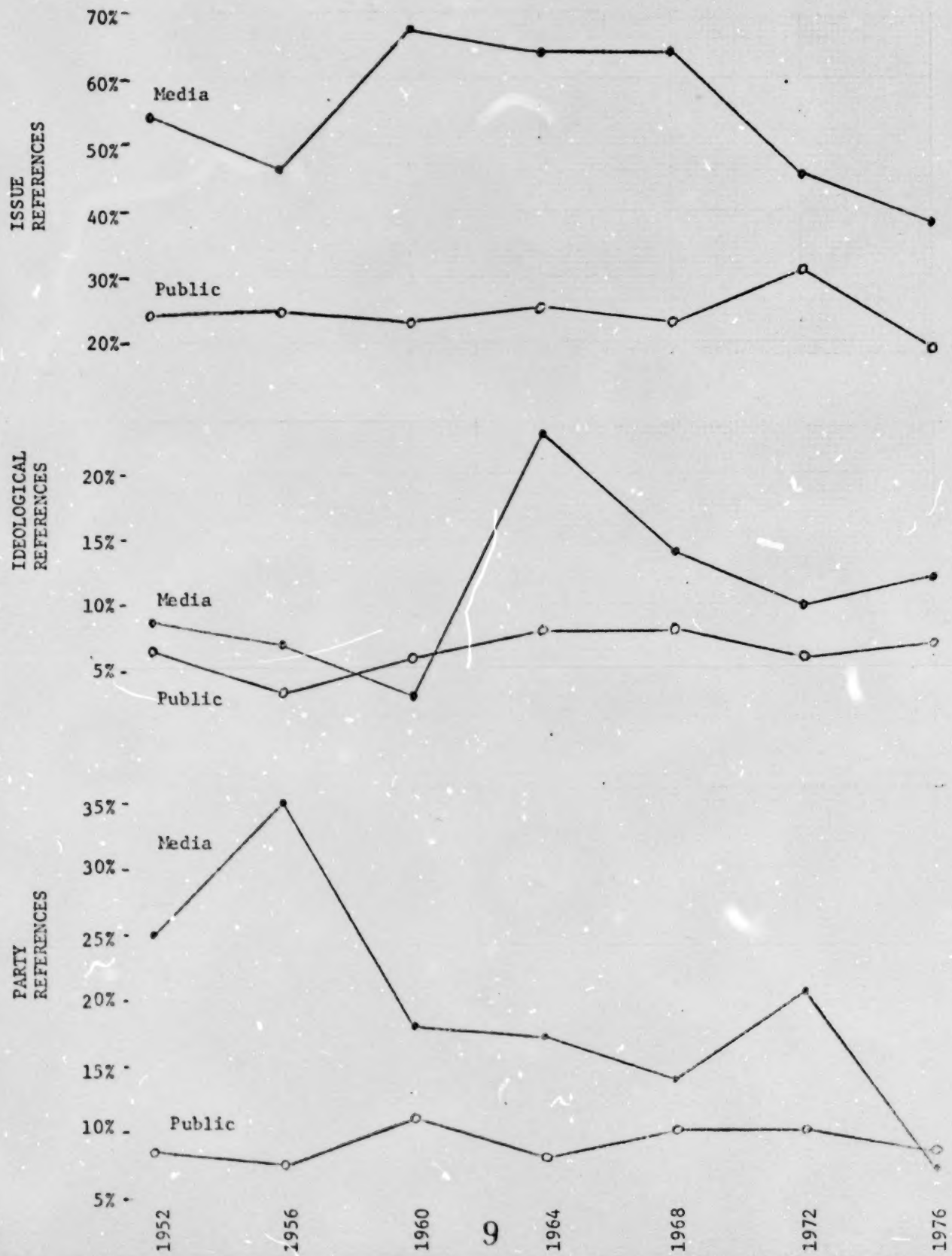
details about the candidates' travel routes but rather to document the relative emphasis on broad categories of political phenomena. In randomly selected cases the coders were assigned to independently code the same stories and the parallel data were used to compute inter-coder reliabilities. Percent agreement ran between 77% and 90% depending on the specificity of the category types.[3]

The Parallel Trends Hypothesis

We have noted that according to a number of recent studies, public attention to political issues and ideological concepts has increased dramatically since the 1950's and that the significance of party identification appears to have declined. We expect, straightforwardly enough, parallel trends in our sample of campaign news coverage. Trends in public opinion and media emphasis on each of these three phenomena have been graphed in Figure 1. The public opinion trends from the ICPSR national election series represent the percent of all comments made by citizens asked why they might vote for or against the contending parties and candidates in each election which dealt with, in turn, policy issues, ideology and political parties. The media data represent the percent of news stories and editorials which, using parallel definitions, dealt with the same three categories.

Overall, the data do not provide strong support for the notion of parallel trends. The curves have been plotted on parallel coordinates to facilitate comparisons and a number of conclusions can be drawn from a simple visual inspection. First, it is evident that the media's response to the different campaigns is somewhat more volatile than the public's.

Figure 1: An Overview of Public Opinion and Media Trends



This raises the interesting question of whether journalistic norms result in a special emphasis on the unique character and procedural minutiae of each individual campaign while the public's paradigm for the evaluation of candidates and parties relies on more fundamental and less ephemeral criteria. Second, the much discussed growth of issue salience and an ideological orientation in the mass electorate is not strongly in evidence in these opinion measures. The percentage of policy issues mentioned by the public does rise but not until 1972 and then in 1976 it declines to a new low. The growth in ideological orientation is evident though in a less dramatic form than in previously published accounts. Strangely, there is no evidence at all of a decline in party orientation. Third, and most central to this analysis, the media and public opinion curves vary quite independently of each other. The Times gave proportionately greater attention to policy issues during the 1960's while special public attention to issues became evident later, during the Nixon-McGovern election of 1972. The media-public opinion time series correlation is $r = -.03$. The notion of a four or eight year lagged effect seemed too implausible to merit further inquiry. In the case of ideology we confront evidence of increases in both media and public attention, $r = .69$, but the dramatic disjunctures in 1960 and 1964 raise questions about the nature of the relationship. Finally, references to political parties actually have a moderate negative time series correlation: $r = -.34$. Overall, these findings do not make a very impressive case for media agenda setting. We turn, then, to analyze each of these paired media-opinion trend lines in more detail in an attempt to determine what dynamic processes might help to explain such patterns.

Salience of Policy Issues

When survey researchers uncovered evidence of the increased importance of "issue politics" in the 1960's it received considerable attention. Among the reasons for interest in these trends was the fact that a number of observers had been somewhat uncomfortable with the major conclusions of the American Voter and similar studies which emphasized the role of party identification and the personal attractiveness of candidates over issue voting in the electoral calculus of the mass citizenry. Such findings, of course, fit uneasily with the rational voter models of democratic politics. Also, the turning point appeared to be 1964 and it was intuitively appealing to interpret Barry Goldwater's candidacy as an unusually ideologically focused appeal which raised the salience of a number of dormant political issues. Furthermore, evidence of the continued rise in the salience of both political issues and ideological concepts made sense as a natural outgrowth of those tumultous times, especially the rise of concern with urban unrest, Vietnam, and the growing counter culture. (Miller and Levitin, 1976) But more recently, as this study and others have demonstrated,[4] the evidence of a dramatic and enduring shift in voters' issue-orientation is not clear-cut. A number of other indicators in addition to the issue salience percentage in Figure 1 such as data on the level of interest in politics and media attentiveness suggest consistency rather than change in the electorate's basic orientation toward the political realm.

Our working hypothesis in this study was not, as some studies seem to imply, that the media's treatment of the Goldwater candidacy in 1964 miraculously transformed the electorate, a rather dubious starting point indeed. Rather, we sought to explore the natural dynamics from election to election between media

coverage and public perceptions. Our initial assumption was that there would be parallel trends with the Times reflecting the sophistication of some of the nation's most distinguished political reporters moving more dramatically up and down on the various indices emphasizing the unique character of each election. We anticipated that public opinion would move in the same directions but would lethargically lumber along behind the media less attentive to the changing political environment. It was also hypothesized that the better educated and more politically oriented citizens would show greater variation from year to year in trends which would be more highly correlated with media coverage than those respondents less attentive to the political hubbub. We also assumed that the Goldwater election of 1964 and the McGovern election of 1972 would represent high points in issue salience and ideological concern.

Given the findings reported in Figure 1 we reoriented the analyses somewhat in an attempt to explain how it could be possible that so often the public zigs when the media zag on these measures. Some of the results of this more detailed analysis are reported in Figure 2. Six indicators of policy issue salience in the media and four for the public response were developed. We first considered the difficulty of comparing the focused and detailed day-to-day election coverage in the press with the more comprehensive evaluation question with which the survey respondents were confronted. In considering why an individual might vote for or against a candidate, one would expect voter responses to focus on the most salient and fundamental criteria. Perhaps the flood of detail, the accumulated miscellany of off-the-cuff remarks made in small towns between Maine and California (all dutifully reported in the Times, of course) functions to

Figure 2

THE RELATIVE SALIENCE OF POLICY ISSUES IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Salience Trends

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976
Media Data							
1) Total	55.0%	46.7%	67.7%	63.9%	64.1%	45.6%	38.0%
2) Front Page Only	74.3	62.4	94.8	92.7	82.6	51.9	40.6
3) Editorial	66.7	38.9	88.2	73.9	76.5	77.5	81.8
4) Pre-Convention	43.2	28.7	48.6	58.4	64.9	33.6	26.9
5) Post-Convention	62.6	63.3	90.1	70.9	63.7	56.8	52.5
6) Linked Issues	52.3	56.0	56.8	65.9	72.9	49.7	36.2
Public Opinion Data							
1) Total	24.2%	24.9%	22.9%	25.1%	22.8%	31.1%	19.2%
2) Voters Only	23.8	26.0	23.1	25.2	22.2	31.4	19.4
3) High Interest Only	23.6	23.6	22.4	25.7	23.5	28.3	19.9
4) Candidate Evaluation only	17.9	22.8	19.1	25.9	19.9	34.7	14.8

Media-Opinion Time Series Correlations (r)

	Media Data 1	2	3	4	5	6
Public Opinion Data						
1)	-.03	-.03	-.17	-.06	-.08	.16
2)	-.09	-.08	-.25	-.16	-.08	.10
3)	.13	.12	.10	.16	.06	.34
4)	-.05	-.07	-.09	-.03	-.11	.17

obscure the distinctive character of particular presidential campaigns. Rather than make a priori judgments about which news stories or issues were truly distinctive, we recomputed the salience of policy issues on the basis of front page news stories only which we took to reflect the collective journalistic judgment of political salience. Indeed, the prominence of policy issues in these stories was consistently higher, especially in 1964. Furthermore, we computed issue salience percentages for editorials only, on the assumption that they, like the voter responses, would be more evaluative and comprehensive in nature and focus on the distinctive and most salient elements of a particular election. Issue salience was also generally higher in editorials although it varied somewhat from year to year.

Another potential discrepancy in our comparison of press coverage and public response was the time frame. Press coverage was monitored from February through November of each election year, the survey data were collected in the final two months before the election. Given that the character of primary elections might be very different from the final two-way race for the presidency, separate indicators were computed for the pre- and post-convention periods. There are two ways of looking at the primary versus election question. In one view the essential character of the election would be evident in the primaries as the Goldwaters, McGoverns and Wallaces express their issue positions with the greatest clarity. In the final election, however, the most ideologically distinct candidates would inevitably be advised to emphasize their political centrism and soft peddle distinctive issue positions in search of middle-of-the-road support. The other view on this issue is simply that the two-way race is what the public were asked to evaluate in their comments and that an appropriate media-opinion comparison would limit itself to that stage of the campaign.

The percentages for both periods are included in Figure 2.

Finally, we explored the possibility that the critical element in issue politics is a clear linkage between a candidate and a specific issue position. As Page (1978) has recently demonstrated, it is often characteristic of candidates to leave some ambiguity in the voters' minds about exactly where they stand. After all, most presidential candidates have over the years developed considerable skill in talking about policy issues without taking a clear stand on them. In the light of such considerations the issue salience percentages were recomputed for those issues which were clearly liked to the candidates, parties and other central political actors or spokespersons.

Also more detailed analyses of the survey findings were undertaken. Given our initial assumption that the responses of the more politically attentive would more closely parallel media coverage we recomputed issue salience figures excluding non-voters and for an even smaller group (36% of the sample) who expressed an especially strong interest in political events and the campaign itself. Respondents in the total sample volunteered on the average 8.3 comments in response to the candidate and party questions. The voter subsample volunteered 9.3, the high-interest groups 10.5. So it is clear these subgroups have more to say. But, as is evident from Figure 2, on a percentabe basis they do not devote a significantly greater amount of attention to policy issues.

Finally, we did uncover a distinctive pattern of public response from election to election by focusing on citizen evaluations of candidates only. It turns out that part of the consistency of public evaluations across time in the ICPSR data results from the fact that the enduring perceptions

of the political parties, especially the traditional association of the Democratic party with "the working man," the Republican party with "business interests" and the policy issues associated with that distinction are reiterated each year in response to the party items. The data for candidate evaluations, however, exhibit much more lability and reassuringly peak in the elections of 1964 and 1972, which corresponds much more closely with commonly accepted perceptions of change through this period of American history.

We turned then to an analysis of time series correlations as reported at the bottom of Figure 2. Again, and with impressive consistency, there is no indication of parallel trends. Most of the coefficients are negative, none indicate strong covariation. One vague inkling of a relationship ($r = .34$) is evident in the correlation between linked issues in the media and the responses of the high-interest respondents. But given that we would expect at least one significant coefficient among 24 due to chance, it would seem to fall somewhat short of clarifying the puzzle at hand.

For the moment, we conclude that the patterns of change in media and public response through this 25 year period are simply too diffuse and contain within them too many subcurrents of changing perception to reflect a clear and persistent pattern of changing issue salience. This does not, of course, represent evidence that the media do not potentially play a critical role in agenda setting, that is, in drawing public attention to particular issues or events. But these findings raise some questions about whether patterns of media coverage emphasizing policy issues can significantly influence the relative salience of issues in the electorate's evaluation of the candidates.

Ideological Conceptions of Presidential Politics

We confront a rather different pattern in the case of ideological trends. First, throughout this period references to ideological concepts are much less prevalent than references to policy issues in both the media and public response. On the average, ideological concepts turn up in 11.1% of the Times articles, and make up 6.5% of citizen comments. Among evaluations of the candidates, only 2.3% of the comments touch on ideological concerns. So when focusing on changes in ideological salience from election to election it is important not to lose sight of the fact that in the larger scheme of things it is a relatively minor component. Second, the media data reflect a very dominant peak in the Goldwater-Johnson election of 1964. Only one other election before or since exceeds levels of ideological salience half that exhibited in 1964. As a result, the character of the analyses naturally turns toward a comparison of other campaigns with that very distinctive chapter of American political history. Third, despite disjunctures in 1960 and 1964 the trends for the media and the public move in similar directions generating a reasonably substantial time series correlation of +.69. Accordingly, we are able to pursue the original hypothesis that the responses of the more attentive respondents would more closely parallel the media coverage. Fourth and finally, there is a disconcerting lack of parallel between the data reported here on ideological salience and a number of other published reports celebrating a dramatic increase in prominence of ideological thinking in the American electorate at the time of the 1964 election (Nie et al., 1975; Nie and Andersen, 1974) The Changing American Voter, for example, using the same ICPSR data source as this study reports levels of "Explicit Ideological Responses" rising from 12% in 1956 to 24%, 30% and 33% in the '64, '68, and '72 elections. (1975, 115) A closer

examination reveals that they use a broader definition of ideology, which unfortunately is susceptible to considerable distortion and may have artifactually increased their estimates of ideological thinking in the 1960's. The culprit is imprecision in the ICPSR Mastercodes which include references to the "liberal (Northern) wing" and "conservative (Southern) wing" of the Democratic party in the same category. As a result the inclusion of respondent references to LBJ's Texas origins in the 1964 election or Wallace's roots in Alabama in 1968 which note a North-South party split may not have actually involved explicit references to such terms as liberal and conservative as Nie, et al. assumed. The more restricted measure of ideological salience used here in Figures 1 and 3 demonstrates ideological salience did rise in 1964 but not at all as dramatically as indicated in Nie's research. As in the case of policy issue salience, the public reflects a rather stable and consistent pattern from year to year.

Figure 3 follows the same format as Figure 2. The underlying hypotheses are the same. In the case of editorials we would expect the overall prominence of ideology to be higher. In the case of the more salient matters addressed in front page stories and editorials, the more focused and comparable post-convention period, and the articles in which ideological concepts are explicitly linked with the major political actors, we would expect trends more highly correlated with public opinion, especially the more attentive citizens.

Overall, Figure 3 provides selective support for some of the hypotheses under consideration. Front page news coverage of ideological matters parallels total news coverage with the exception of 1964, where it is especially prominent. Surprisingly, editorials do not appear to devote especially high levels of attention to ideological matters. The exception is again 1964 and also 1976,

Figure 3

THE RELATIVE SALIENCE OF IDEOLOGY IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Salience Trends

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976
Media Data							
1) Total	8.7%	7.1%	3.0%	23.3%	14.1%	10.1%	17.2%
2) Front Page	11.9	5.0	2.6	34.5	15.2	9.3	12.5
3) Editorials	11.1	5.3	5.6	34.7	20.6	11.2	27.3
4) Pre-Convention	5.3	7.0	3.7	29.7	9.6	10.0	16.9
5) Post-Convention	10.8	7.2	2.2	17.2	16.7	10.0	6.1
6) Linked	5.4	1.9	0.0	10.0	9.5	6.1	5.0
Public Opinion Data							
1) Total	6.5%	3.4%	6.0%	8.2%	8.1%	6.2%	6.9%
2) Voters Only	6.8	3.7	6.5	8.6	8.5	6.3	8.3
3) High Interest Only	7.7	3.5	7.9	9.6	9.4	6.4	8.3
4) Candidate Evaluation Only	1.2	.5	.9	4.4	4.1	3.0	2.2

Media-Opinion Time Series Correlations (r)

	Media Data 1	2	3	4	5	6
Public Opinion Data						
1)	.69	.70	.77	.55	.64	.78
2)	.67	.68	.79	.57	.58	.74
3)	.57	.62	.71	.48	.48	.62
4)	.87	.78	.78	.70	.83	.92

which may represent the initiation of a new editorial policy at the Times. The data on pre- versus post-convention coverage provide support for that old and irrefutable historical maxim: sometimes it's this way, sometimes the other. In 1964 and 1976 a fairly ideologically active primary battle was followed by an election campaign which generated fewer explicit ideological references. In 1968 the pattern was reversed, probably partly as a result of Wallace's persistent presence. More detailed analyses of linkage codes which isolate references to the primary races in each party, each year will be necessary to clarify this issue further.

The hypothesis that variation in ideological salience among the more attentive would follow the media more closely fares poorly here. Generally the proportion of ideological references is not very different from the total sample and rather consistently the trend correlations are lower rather than higher. It was noted earlier that the attentive respondents who tend to be better educated and more politically active do indeed volunteer significantly greater numbers of comments each year. We explored the possibility that an unusually large number of comments on matters other than ideology in the more interesting races such as 1964 might have obscured a real jump in ideological salience. But it turns out that both the voter and high-interest subsamples, like the full sample, generate a surprisingly consistent number of responses regardless of the particular character of the election.

An examination of the table of time series correlations at the bottom of Figure 3 reveals a number of general conclusions. It is apparent that the correlation of ideological salience in the media and public is robust enough that regardless of the particular index used, the coefficients are

consistently high. To test whether the critical outlier election of 1964 had undue influence on the calculations and whether it might have obscured the unique character of one or another of the indices in the figure, we recomputed the coefficients omitting the 1964 data. The average coefficient dropped somewhat from .69 to .55, still a substantial testament to parallel trends. The patterns of correlation for the subindices remained consistent.

Perhaps the most instructive finding in these results is the pattern of higher time series correlation for editorials (which because of their evaluative character traditionally involve more explicit linkages of candidates and ideas) and the subsample of explicit linkages in news articles. Both average a time series correlation of .76 across all opinion measures; the linked subsample and the candidate-only index correlate .92. The lesson appears to be that a great number of issues and an occasional ideological comment may work its way into the statements of candidates and, in turn, the daily reports of the news media. But because of the confusing flurry of ideas, slogans and images of crowds, banners, and balloons unless specific characterizations are clearly and repeatedly linked with specific candidates, the effect is lost. Such a conclusion parallels Patterson and McClure's research on the effects of campaign advertising in the 1972 election. (1976)

Persistence and Change in the Role of Political Parties

Trends in the characterization of political parties will receive less attention in this analysis because the data in this case are somewhat less appropriate to the underlying research question. The problem is that the current decline of partisanship represents not a change in the parties themselves but a change in the psychological importance of party identification

among some citizens, especially younger voters. The passing on of party affiliation across generations, the character of the local or regional political environment and level of activity of the local party organization, even social pressures in the occupational sphere represent several of the important factors in this complex equation. Our media indices of party salience, then, only scratch the surface of these complicated trends.

Figure 4 summarizes the analysis. Except for an apparent anomaly in 1972, the media have indeed devoted less attention to political parties in recent elections. The linear downward trend (again with the exception of 1972) is especially pronounced in the critical test of explicit linkages between candidates and party. The salience of parties for the public, however, appears to remain relatively constant. Because the opinion data is based in part on specific inquiries into attitudes towards the parties, and because survey respondents under such circumstances most often obligingly provide answers, the critical test is the trend based on candidate evaluations only. Here the trend is downward, resulting in a moderate time series correlations averaging .34. Surprisingly, the correlation between candidate evaluation and post-convention coverage is the lowest of all, $r = .19$, raising further questions about the dynamics here.

For the record, the time series correlation between total media coverage of parties and the percent of citizens who identify themselves as affiliated is a rather unimpressive .06, reflecting again parallel downward trends but an inexplicable 12-year lag between the media and the public response. Again, this is not taken to be a critical test as it represents only a small part of a much more complex pattern of social change.

Figure 4

THE RELATIVE SALIENCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Salience Trends

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976
Media Data							
1) Total	25.2%	34.8%	18.2%	17.2%	13.7%	20.6%	7.0%
2) Front Page	28.4	30.7	23.4	18.2	18.5	24.1	12.5
3) Editorials	22.2	50.0	29.4	21.7	8.8	10.1	6.1
4) Pre-Convention	25.3	36.6	23.4	22.8	14.9	18.2	4.6
5) Post-Convention	25.2	33.0	12.1	10.1	13.1	22.9	10.1
6) Linked	30.1	32.0	18.9	11.4	15.0	27.5	3.6
Public Opinion Data							
1) Total	8.7%	7.6%	11.0%	8.0%	10.3%	10.2%	8.5%
2) Voters Only	8.5	7.5	10.8	8.1	10.4	10.5	8.3
3) High Interest Only	7.8	7.7	10.6	8.3	10.0	11.4	8.8
4) Candidate Evaluation Only	3.1	2.8	3.6	1.3	2.6	1.3	2.0

Media-Opinion Time Series Correlations (r)

Public Opinion Data	1	2	3	4	5	6
1)	-.34	-.10	-.39	-.30	-.35	-.03
2)	-.33	-.11	-.42	-.30	-.32	-.02
3)	-.36	-.20	-.46	-.37	-.30	-.07
4)	.29	.43	.46	.35	.19	.31

The Validity Problem

A question of valid inference hangs over this analysis. Is it appropriate in the context of these hypotheses of national political trends to use the New York Times as a valid indicator of national election coverage which, of course, includes television, radio, local newspapers and a wide variety of weekly and monthly periodicals?

As was noted, this paper reports on only part of a larger research project which will ultimately include parallel content analyses of election coverage in a representative sample of local newspapers and two national news magazines since 1952 and television news since 1968. So a much more complete answer to the validity question will be forthcoming shortly.

For the time being we are forced to rely on a number of research studies which indicate that coverage of prominent national events such as election campaigns is strikingly similar in the different media. For professional and competitive reasons, journalists spend a great deal of effort monitoring each other's performance . Professional norms strongly encourage the development of consensual interpretations and emphases. (Crouse, 1973) Also, of course, the fact that the wire services provide identical news stories to local newspapers and local broadcast outlets and in the case of newspapers, the same syndicated political columnists as well reinforcesthe pattern of homogeneous campaign coverage.

Graber's study of press coverage in the 1968 election (1974), for example, studied 16 daily papers from the Bangor Daily News to the Los Angeles Times (including the New York Times) and found that the only difference in coverage was quantitative, that is, the larger papers in the larger urban areas which,

of course, have a greater number of column inches for news at their disposal, average more campaign stories in an average day. But the relative emphasis on issues and candidates is strikingly similar. Hofstetter's study of television and wire service coverage of the 1972 election came to the same conclusion. (1976) The parallel coverage is not necessarily characteristic of editorials, of course. So, for the purposes of valid inference, the correlations between front page news coverage in the Times (again, reflecting the most salient news, likely to also be covered by smaller papers and broadcast news) is probably the best estimate.

Some Conclusions

It may be appropriate at this point to reiterate a distinction made earlier. The mode of analysis undertaken here is not, strictly speaking, a test of the agenda-setting hypothesis. According to McCombs (1979), "The basic idea of agenda-setting asserts a direct, causal relationship between the content of the media agenda and subsequent public perception of what the important issues of the day are." This analyses differs in several respects. The emphasis here is broader. The indices used reflect the relative emphasis on policy issues, ideology and political parties compared with all other elements of campaign coverage not the relative emphasis on one type of political issue over another. Our findings address the issue of whether a particular and presumably convergent emphasis of the different news media on issues or ideology in a particular campaign will function to raise the salience of issues and/or ideology in the public's decisionmaking for that election.

The findings are mixed. Overall, we see very little evidence of the ability of the media to raise the salience of policy issues in the public mind.

Further research on this matter may generate a saturation model of some sort which identifies the number of salient issues the public is collectively willing to consider at a given time. There is no question that the issues themselves change. And, in time, with dramatic expansion in the public's overall level of education and perhaps also with the expansion of new and more extensive broadcast news coverage through satellites and cable, there may be significant changes in the parameters of media effects. Over the time period covered here, however, the salience of policy issues in public opinion reflects a pattern of consistency rather than change.

In the case of ideology and party identification the conclusion is somewhat different. An explicit concern with abstract ideological concepts has not been a major element of recent American campaigning and it does not receive a great deal of attention in either the media or public response. There is some methodological controversy surrounding the assertion that the public has dramatically changed its perceptions of ideological concepts. But, to the extent that there has been an overall increasing reliance on such concepts and to the extent that certain elections have laid special emphasis on ideological concerns, we find parallel trends in the media and public. The fact that the public response moves upward in response to the ideological stimulus of particular candidates and the media seems to indicate an openness in this area to continuing media effects. There is no evidence of a saturation or ceiling effect. Ultimately to test such a notion, however, we would have to study campaigns focusing either in speechmaking or in the media interpretation more extensively on broader and more abstract concepts of the role of government. Given the competitive and cautious position of the news media and most candidates, this would seem an unlikely event.

Finally, there is significant evidence of a drop-off in the salience of party identification, especially among younger voters. It is a complex phenomenon, perhaps tied to a political realignment and the long-term ramifications are unclear. The relative emphasis on party in the media and public opinion reflects a weak parallel. The numerous exceptions to the overall trend will require a more focused analysis. We conclude, tentatively, that media coverage is a contributory element in the case of declining party identification.

Footnotes

[1] There is considerable controversy among researchers over the character of some of these changes. The debate focuses on the extent to which significant changes in the format of opinion items might have distorted the trend data on issue clustering and issue voting. That turns out not to be a problem in this analysis because we rely on the open-ended likes/dislikes battery of the ICPSR election series which has utilized substantially the same format since it was first asked in 1952. (Petrocik, 1978; Bishop, et al., 1978; Sullivan, et al, 1978)

[2] We had to add a few categories concerning campaigning activities, but otherwise the simplified Mastercode proved remarkably adequate for the task of describing the central themes of newspaper coverage of the campaign. A summary of the coding scheme is included in an appendix.

[3] Calculations based on 200 coding decisions for data grouped in the twelve content categories used for the bulk of the analysis indicated inter-code agreement for 77% of the decisions. The bulk of the "disagreements" turned out not to be different codes for the same object but one coder including an additional code which the other coder omitted as not central to the article. Intercoder agreement on the central three objects was 90%. Scott's more appropriate (and more conservative) coefficient of reliability which takes into account the number of categories used and the percent agreement one would expect due to chance computes out to $\pi = .73$ and $\pi = .88$ for total and primary coding decisions, respectively. (Scott, 1955)

[4] The conclusions of the American voter were based on a substantially different methodological approach and different survey item formats than more recent inquiries. It is a difficult problem. Different methodological designs represent, in effect, different definitions of "issue voting" and are likely to generate divergent estimates of its prominence in the electorate. (Popkin, et al, 1976; Sullivan, et al, 1978; Bishop et al, 1978) So a number of ambiguities remain concerning the extent to which apparent changes have resulted from changing survey formats, changing voters or changing candidates and styles of campaigning. Petrocik (1978) in a more recent overview of these issues concludes in the light of a dramatic fall-off of issue salience in 1976 that some of these apparent changes did not represent a major shift in voter orientations but rather the natural response of voters to the changing political environment. Assuming Petrocik is correct, we should be more concerned than ever with the role the news media play in these changing public perceptions.

APPENDIX

Revised Mastercode Scheme -- Summary Outline

Candidate Codes

Including: neutral references, references to candidates' experience, leadership ability, decisiveness, energy level, as well as personal qualities such as personality, demeanor, looks, health, social background, and family.

Issue Codes

Including: 7 social welfare issue clusters, 7 issues concerning public order and civil liberties, 6 broad economic issues, 14 foreign policy areas, 7 national defense issues and 4 areas concerning government activity, philosophy and ideology.

Political Party Codes

Including: references to parties' past activities, party management and ties to geographical regions and social groups.

Political Group and Constituency Codes

Including: business groups, middle class constituencies, working class constituencies, labor unions, farmers, blacks, other ethnic minorities, veterans, women, the elderly, young people/students, religious groups and geographic regions.

Government/Nation/Nature of Times Codes

Including: general references to the state of the country or economy, and extent to which government is well-managed.

Event Codes

Including: general campaign mechanics and scheduling, campaign hoopla, electoral strategies, primary election and poll results, media activities, and specific events such as JFK assination, Cuban missile crisis, Watergate, and the Eagleton affair.

Political Actor Codes

Including: party spokespersons, protestors, federal officials, congressional and local candidates, international officials and spokespersons for domestic groups.

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